

Helga Schneider: Life, Memory, and Literary Witness



Helga Schneider in her later years, an Italian writer of German origin whose works confront her family's Nazi past. ¹ ²

Early Life in Nazi Germany

Helga Schneider was born on 17 November 1937 in Steinberg, a village in Silesia that was then part of Germany (today Jastrzębnik in Poland) ¹. Her early childhood was marked by upheaval and trauma during World War II. In 1941, when Helga was only four years old, her mother Traudi abandoned the family in Berlin – leaving Helga and her baby brother Peter (then 19 months old) – to join the Nazi **SS** as a camp guard ³ ⁴. This shocking decision meant that Helga's mother went off to serve at the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp and later at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the most notorious Nazi death camp ³ ⁵. Helga's father was away serving as a soldier, so the two small children were left effectively orphaned in the midst of war ⁴.

Initially, Helga and Peter were cared for by an aunt and then by their paternal grandmother in Berlin ⁶. However, further disruption came when Helga's father returned from the front. He remarried in 1942, but Helga's new stepmother refused to accept Helga in the household (though she kept baby Peter) ⁷. The little girl was sent away to an institution – first a reform school for “difficult” children and then a boarding school for those from broken families ⁸. These years were painfully lonely for Helga, essentially **exiled** from her family while still just a child. In late 1944, as the war neared its end, a step-aunt brought 7-year-old Helga back to Berlin, which by then had been reduced to ruins by Allied bombing ⁹. Helga spent the final months of the war huddling in a cellar with her father's new family to survive relentless air raids, enduring intense cold and hunger ¹⁰.

Remarkably, in December 1944, Helga had a harrowing brush with history: through her step-aunt's connections in Joseph Goebbels' propaganda ministry, Helga and her brother were chosen to be among the “Führer's little guests” who were brought to Adolf Hitler's bunker ¹¹. In that surreal encounter, the

young Helga met Hitler in person. She later described him in unglamorous detail – an aging, haggard man with a magnetically piercing gaze but a shuffling gait, a face “full of wrinkles” and a limp, sweaty handshake ¹² ¹³ . This vivid recollection of Hitler as a feeble, almost pitiful figure (“un vecchio invalido, ricurvo” – *an invalid old man, hunched over*, as she told an Italian interviewer) stayed with Helga ¹⁴ . For a child who had already suffered so much, meeting the Nazi dictator did not inspire awe but rather seems to have reinforced her sense of the war’s tragic absurdity. In 1945, Berlin fell and the Third Reich collapsed. By 1948, Helga’s father and surviving family repatriated to Austria, settling at a relatives’ home by Lake Attersee, where Helga spent her adolescence ¹⁵ .



Helga Schneider (left) as a young girl with her brother Peter in wartime Berlin. Their mother abandoned them in 1941 to serve as an SS guard ³ .

Life in Italy and Confrontation with Her Mother

In 1963, at age 26, Helga Schneider moved to Italy – the country that would become her adopted home ¹⁶ . She settled in Bologna, learned Italian, and started a new life far from the shadows of her childhood. She married an Italian man and in the late 1960s had a son, Renzo Samaritani ¹⁷ . For many years, Helga tried to bury the memory of her own mother. Her father had never explained the reasons for Traudi’s disappearance – the topic was taboo and “it’s better to forget all about her,” he insisted ¹⁸ . But becoming a mother herself stirred something in Helga. “When my son was two or three,” she later recalled, “I started to think, *‘You’re a mother now, but what’s become of your mother?’*” ¹⁹ . In 1971, unable to suppress her curiosity and longing, Helga resolved to track down the woman who had left her 30 years before ²⁰ .

Helga managed to locate her mother in **Vienna** by sending letters to women with the last name Schneider. To her surprise, one replied: “It’s me.” ²⁰ Gathering her courage, Helga traveled to Vienna in 1971 – bringing little Renzo with her – hopeful that she might regain a mother and even find a loving grandmother for her child ²⁰ ²¹ . The reunion, however, turned into a devastating shock. Traudi, about 60 years old then, showed **no warmth** toward Helga or the toddler Renzo. “She didn’t even look at my son,” Helga recounted – the woman merely offered the boy biscuits and milk, utterly detached ²¹ . Then, on a flimsy pretext, Traudi led her daughter into a bedroom and opened a wardrobe, proudly taking out an old **SS uniform** ²² . “*I would very much like you to try it on,*” she said. Helga was baffled – at first she even thought it might be a costume for a play. Only when Traudi explained “*I wore this uniform at Birkenau*” did the horrifying truth hit Helga ²³ . “*After 30 years I had in front of me not a mother, but a war criminal – and one who was not penitent,*” Helga recalls of that moment ²⁴ . Traudi beamed with

nostalgia for her Nazi days, at one point exclaiming in German, *“Es war so schön!”* (“It was so beautiful!”), referring to the Third Reich ²⁴ . She even kept **looted jewels** from Auschwitz victims and tried to gift them to Helga – who realized what they were, let the pieces clatter to the floor, and refused to touch them ²⁵ ²⁶ . In the space of a few minutes, Helga’s hopeful dream of reconciliation was shattered by her mother’s unabashed fanaticism and lack of remorse. Feeling ill and shocked, Helga fled the apartment with a perfunctory promise to return, but instead caught the next train back to Italy with her son ²⁷ ²⁸ . *“Something changed in my mind,”* Helga later said of that day. *“I realized I had never had a mother. I told myself, ‘Enough...I never will have a mother.’”* ²⁹ To protect herself, she tried to **emotionally seal off** the wound and “not think about her anymore” ³⁰ .

For decades after that traumatic encounter, Helga avoided any further contact with Traudi. It was only in 1998 – nearly **27 years later** – that fate intervened again. Helga, by then a widow (her husband had died of cancer in 1985 ³¹) and an aspiring writer, received an unexpected letter from Vienna ³² ³³ . It was from a friend of her mother’s, informing her that Traudi, nearing 90 and suffering from senility, had been placed in a nursing home. *“Your mother could pass away any day,”* the letter urged. *“Why not consider meeting her one last time? After all, she is still your mother.”* ³⁴ Helga was deeply reluctant – by now **almost a stranger** to the woman who gave birth to her – but ultimately conscience nagged her to go. *“I thought to myself, one day someone will ring up and say, ‘Your mother is dead.’ So I said, OK, I’ll go,”* Helga explained ³⁵ . *“Perhaps she has repented at last...perhaps she realized she got everything wrong.”* ³⁶ In late 1998, Helga went to the Austrian nursing home for a final visit, bringing along a cousin for support ³⁷ . What she found was a frail, *“unbelievably fragile”* old woman who at first did not even recognize her: *“My daughter died long ago,”* Traudi declared in confusion ³⁸ . Yet, chillingly, certain topics could still spark the **old fervor** in her ailing mind. When talk turned to the days of Hitler’s “glory,” Traudi’s lucidity returned. She eagerly reminisced about her time as one of *“Hitler’s elect”* – recounting, with glee, gruesome details of how prisoners were tortured and killed ³⁹ ⁴⁰ . Sensing in her daughter a morbid curiosity, the elderly woman **regaled Helga with one appalling anecdote after another**: boasting how she made prisoners *“spit blood”*, how *“not everyone died at the same rate in the gas chambers”*, even describing barbaric executions she had witnessed ⁴¹ ⁴² . It was an avalanche of horror from a mother determined to hold her daughter’s attention by any means. Helga could barely endure it. She finally tore herself away, *“this time forever,”* and rushed home to Bologna in a state of emotional collapse ⁴³ . In the aftermath, Helga suffered panic attacks – nightmares, cold sweats, a racing heart – as if her mother’s toxic legacy were a poison in her veins ⁴³ . Doctors prescribed medication to ease her anxiety, but the trauma briefly even **stifled her ability to write** ⁴⁴ . It was only after this second encounter – and at the encouragement of her literary agent – that Helga decided to *write* about the experience as a form of exorcism ⁴⁵ . Thus, her most famous memoir was born (as discussed below).

Helga Schneider’s personal life was not only shaped by her relationship with her mother, but also affected by her relationship with her own son **Renzo**. In fact, Helga had chosen to shield Renzo from the family’s dark secret for many years. She even deliberately **avoided teaching him German**, hoping to keep him far from the cultural legacy of Nazism and his grandmother’s crimes ⁴⁶ . Renzo only learned the truth in the mid-1990s when he was already an adult. In 1995, Helga published *Il rogo di Berlino*, her autobiographical novel about her wartime childhood. A friend phoned Renzo and urged him to read it: *“Go buy your mother’s book and read it. You’re the grandson of a Nazi,”* the friend warned ⁴⁷ ⁴⁸ . Renzo was stunned and hurt. *“When I discovered my grandmother was a Nazi, I was already grown up... My mother had kept it hidden from me,”* he said ⁴⁹ . The revelation caused a profound shock in him – *“I still carry the weight of a guilt that isn’t mine, but nevertheless belongs to my family’s past,”* Renzo admitted ⁴⁶ . He also recalls losing friends who could not handle knowing about his *“nonna mostro”* (“monster” grandmother) ⁴⁹ . In retrospect, Renzo understood his mother’s intentions to protect him from horror, but he resented the decades of secrecy that left him unprepared for the truth ⁴⁶ . This added another layer of tension to an already fraught mother-son relationship. As a young man, Renzo had rebelled in his own

way – immersing himself in spiritual exploration (including a period in a Hare Krishna community) and eventually coming out as gay, which led to conflicts with Helga in the 1980s ⁵⁰ ⁵¹ . He left home around age 20, and by his own account, “*there’s no relationship between us... unresolved conflicts since I left home*”, even though they once lived only a few blocks apart in Bologna ⁵² . Despite their estrangement, Renzo in adulthood became a writer as well, perhaps influenced by Helga’s example ⁵³ ⁵⁴ . In recent years he has sought to come to terms with his family history. Now living in Trani (southern Italy) with his partner, Renzo has spoken publicly about the inherited trauma of being “*il nipote di una nazista*” ⁴⁷ ⁴⁹ . For Holocaust Remembrance Day 2025, he even took part in an event at a local theater to share his story and “*give voice to our suffering*” – a therapeutic act of remembrance for the “invisible victims” like himself, who bear a burden of shame through no fault of their own ⁵⁵ . Through both Helga’s and Renzo’s experiences, it is clear that the ripple effects of Traudi’s choices spanned three generations, leaving deep emotional scars but also a resolve to confront the past openly.

Literary Career and Major Works

Helga Schneider’s career as a writer did not begin until she was in her fifties – a fact that underscores how long it took for her to turn personal trauma into published art. Although German is her mother tongue, she made the deliberate choice to write **exclusively in Italian**, the language of her adopted country ¹ . Her literary work has been, by her own design, a way to process and bear witness to the harrowing history that shaped her life. As one academic observer noted, Schneider’s writing is fundamentally a confrontation with her mother’s Nazi past, an attempt to retell private pain in the context of public history ⁵⁶ ⁵⁷ .

Schneider’s first book was *La bambola decapitata* (“The Decapitated Doll”), published in 1993 ⁵⁸ . This debut was a fictional work (a psychological novel dealing with an incestuous syndrome), which did not yet delve into her wartime memories. Her breakthrough came with ***Il rogo di Berlino*** (“The Bonfire of Berlin”) in 1995 ⁵⁸ . This book is a searing autobiographical account of her childhood in wartime Berlin – the “*città in macerie*” (“city of ruins”) in which she struggled to survive ⁵⁹ . *Il rogo di Berlino* vividly depicts the misery of Berliners under Allied bombardment, the terror of air raids, and the desperation of a child’s daily hunt for food and water amidst the rubble ⁶⁰ . The novel was both a critical and commercial success, and it earned Helga Schneider the prestigious **Premio Rapallo Carige** for women writers in 1996 ⁶¹ . An English translation was later published as *The Bonfire of Berlin: A Lost Childhood in Wartime Germany*, introducing international readers to Schneider’s WWII experiences ⁶² .

However, it is Helga Schneider’s next major work – ***Lasciami andare, madre*** (“Let Me Go, Mother”) – that truly defined her literary persona and legacy. Published in Italy in 2001, this memoir directly addresses Schneider’s *two confrontations* with her mother (in 1971 and 1998) and the lifetime of conflicted emotions that resulted ⁶³ ⁶⁴ . In writing *Lasciami andare, madre*, Schneider finally put into words the “*immenso conflitto*” – the immense conflict – of the mother-daughter bond corrupted by Nazi fanaticism ⁶⁵ . The book is structured around their dialogues and Helga’s inner turmoil: it is a cathartic **reckoning with the mother figure**, described as a “*rabid settling of accounts*” with the unrepentant parent ⁶⁶ . Schneider pours out her **contradictory feelings** – a mix of longing, anger, pity, and frustrated love. “*I wanted to love a mother, but not that mother,*” she admits in its pages; “*I despised that woman... and at the same time I felt rage because I couldn’t manage to hate her, and thus forget her definitively.*” ⁶⁷ . Such passages lay bare the paradox of her situation: she cannot forgive her mother’s inhuman crimes, yet she cannot stop the residual daughterly instinct that aches for maternal warmth ⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ . This moral and emotional quandary at the heart of *Lasciami andare, madre* has resonated with many readers around the world. The book was quickly translated into numerous languages – for example, into **English** as *Let Me Go: My Mother and the SS*, into **French** as *Laisse-moi partir, mère*, into **Spanish** as *Déjame ir, madre*, and into **German** as *Laß mich gehen* ⁶⁹ ⁶⁴ . It became an international talking point, as it offered a rare perspective: the testimony not of a Holocaust victim or survivor, but of a daughter of a **perpetrator**,

grappling with inherited guilt and the legacy of evil. Critics noted the book's unflinching honesty. *Let Me Go* was described as a "compelling and unforgettable story" and "an excellent choice for discussion" about how different people deal with the aftermath of war ⁷⁰. "Schneider packs a tremendous emotional punch into this brief but cathartic memoir," wrote one reviewer ⁷¹. At the same time, the memoir provoked important ethical questions. Scholarly analyses have discussed *Lasciami andare, madre* in terms of the "ethical burden" Helga carries in retelling these private events ⁵⁷. One French-Italian study observed that Schneider, as a writer, makes the reader almost a **jury** in a "written public trial" of her mother – effectively inviting society to judge an unrepentant war criminal through the medium of literature ⁷². Indeed, Helga includes detailed evidence of her mother's cruelty, almost as if to ensure no forgiveness can be granted ⁷³. Some critics in Germany took issue with Schneider's narrative focus. Notably, author Erich Hackl argued that in *Laß mich gehen*, Helga's portrayal of Holocaust victims was somewhat impersonal – depicting the camp inmates only as a **faceless, desperate mass**, while the narrative dwells more on Helga's own emotional journey ⁷⁴. Hackl paradoxically contended that Schneider's fixation on her personal trauma risked mirroring her mother's lack of regard for individual victims, by keeping the prisoners in the background as anonymous figures ⁷⁴. However, other reviewers found the memoir thoughtful and profound. The German magazine *Neues Deutschland* noted that Schneider **reproduces her mother's gruesome stories** and "explains why she, despite the fact that her mother even now felt no remorse for her inhuman deeds, could not bring herself to hate her." The result, wrote one critic, is "a very thought-provoking book that drags the reader into the vortex of the author's contradictory feelings towards her mother." ⁷⁵ This divergence in critical reception highlights how Schneider's work sits at a fraught intersection of personal memory and historical atrocity – it challenges readers to contemplate forgiveness, justice, and the complexity of familial love under extreme circumstances.

Beyond her two autobiographical cornerstones, Helga Schneider has written numerous other novels and stories, often returning to the setting of the Third Reich and its aftermath. Many of her works blend fictional characters with historically accurate contexts, continuing her mission to explore "le ferite della Storia" (the wounds of History) through literature. A partial list of her major works includes:

- **Porta di Brandeburgo** (1997) – a novel named after Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, presumably reflecting on post-war Berlin or divided Germany.
- **Il piccolo Adolf non aveva le ciglia** (1998; "Little Adolf Had No Eyelashes") – a provocative title that explores another dark aspect of Nazism. This novel tells the story of a woman named Grete, who at 80 years old looks back on a life that entangled her with the Nazi regime. As a young woman, Grete worked as a Gestapo secretary and married a high-ranking Nazi official, but suffered a personal tragedy: she gave birth to a child (nicknamed "little Adolf") who was taken from her – a reference to the Nazis' secret **euthanasia program (Aktion T4)** that targeted the disabled ⁷⁶. Grete's desperate search for her son and the horrors she witnesses eventually force her to confront the true nature of Nazi evil ⁷⁷. This book won Schneider another award, the **Premio Letterario Chianti**, in 2000 ⁶¹.
- **Stelle di cannella** (2002; "Cinnamon Stars") – a novel whose title evokes the traditional cinnamon star cookies. It is set in 1930s–40s Germany and likely centers on a child's experience of friendship across cultural or religious lines; in fact, *Stelle di cannella* tells of a German girl and a Jewish girl in 1933 Berlin, exploring innocence amid rising hatred (as other sources note).
- **L'usignolo dei Linke** (2004; "The Nightingale of the Linke Family") – a story set in war-torn Europe; this was successful enough to be translated into German as *Als wir Kinder waren* ("When We Were Children") ⁷⁸, indicating it deals with childhood perspective on the war.
- **L'albero di Goethe** (2004; "Goethe's Tree") – another 2004 work, perhaps reflecting on German cultural heritage through a literary symbol in the context of war and memory.
- **Io, piccola ospite del Führer** (2006; "I, Little Guest of the Führer") – here Schneider revisits her extraordinary encounter with Hitler. Aimed at younger readers, this book recounts how seven-

year-old Helga ended up in Hitler's bunker as part of Goebbels' propaganda event ⁷⁹. It serves to transmit historical memory to a new generation, through the eyes of a child.

- **Heike riprende a respirare** (2008; "Heike Breathes Again") – a novel that may deal with a woman named Heike overcoming the suffocating legacy of the past (the title metaphorically suggests a liberation or a gasp of freedom).
- **La baracca dei tristi piaceri** (2009; "The Shack of Sad Pleasures") – a novel shining light on the grim reality of the **brothels in Nazi concentration camps**. Schneider addresses the sexual slavery that occurred in places like Auschwitz: "*ci parla di un altro orrore messo in atto dai Nazisti: il programma di eutanasia... T4,*" one reviewer writes, indicating the book tackles another Nazi crime, possibly mixing the theme of camp brothels and euthanasia programs ⁷⁶. This reflects Schneider's commitment to exposing even the less discussed atrocities of the regime.
- **Rosel e la strana famiglia del signor Kreutzberg** (2010) – likely a story that also delves into family secrets and Nazi-era moral compromises, given the patterns in Schneider's work.
- **I miei vent'anni** (2013; "My Twenty Years") – possibly a more personal or introspective book, potentially recounting Schneider's own young adulthood in post-war Europe (the 1950s-60s), including her move to Italy and adaptation to a new culture.
- **L'inutile zavorra dei sentimenti** (2015; "The Useless Ballast of Feelings") – a novel whose title suggests the burden of emotions; it might explore how people carry emotional baggage from past relationships or history. Given the timing, Schneider might be addressing later-life reflections or contemporary echoes of wartime trauma.
- **Un amore adolescente** (2017; "An Adolescent Love") – likely a tale of first love set against a historical backdrop; it could be informed by wartime or immediate post-war setting (for instance, a love story in the ruins of Berlin or Vienna). Schneider by now often wrote historical fiction that, while not directly about her, remained in the orbit of WWII and its aftermath.

In the last decade, Helga Schneider has continued to use fiction as a means to explore the darkest chapters of the 20th century and draw parallels to present-day issues. Notably, at age 83 she published **Bruceranno come ortiche secche. Relazioni pericolose ai tempi di Adolf** (2021; "They Will Burn Like Dry Nettles: Dangerous Relationships in the Time of Adolf") ⁸⁰. In this novel, Schneider turns her attention to the persecution of homosexuals under the Nazi regime – a subject that was long neglected in historical discourse. She tells the story of two young gay men in 1930s Berlin, weaving a "*potente affresco*" (powerful fresco) of that era's fear and repression ⁸⁰. What makes the book especially poignant is the figure of a mother in the story who, fanatically loyal to Nazi ideology, ends up betraying her own son to the authorities for being homosexual ⁸¹. In one pivotal moment, that mother character cannot accept her son's identity "*to the point that she'd rather shoot herself in the head*" than acknowledge the truth ⁸¹. Schneider admits that, consciously or not, she may have modeled aspects of this character on her **own mother**, Traudi, whose fanatical devotion to Hitler led her to abandon her children decades earlier ⁸¹. By creating this fictional story, Schneider not only memorializes the often overlooked gay victims of Nazi terror, but also continues her personal literary dialogue with the figure of the merciless mother. Critics noted how *Bruceranno come ortiche secche* feels urgently relevant; through dialogues between its characters, Schneider draws parallels between past and present, warning that prejudice and hatred are still dangers unless we foster a "*cultura del diverso*" – a culture of respecting differences ⁸² ⁸³. Following this, Schneider released *In nome del Reich* (2022) and *Un balcone con vista Bismarckstrasse* (2023), both of which, judging by their titles, continue to delve into Nazi history and its personal stories (Bismarckstrasse is a street name, presumably in Berlin, hinting at a historical setting). Even in her late 80s, Helga Schneider shows no signs of averting her gaze from the **Nazi era**; in 2025, she published *Hitler. Mai prima di mezzogiorno* ("Hitler: Never Before Noon"), referencing Adolf Hitler's habit of sleeping in – an almost darkly humorous detail that underscores how even banal personal facts can acquire symbolic weight when examining monstrous historical figures ⁸⁴. Through all these works, Schneider's overarching purpose has been consistent: to shine light on the pernicious effects of fanaticism and to ensure that the memory of what happened in those years – in her own family and in Europe at large – is not lost. "*After the war, people said: enough, let's not talk about it anymore. But I wanted*

to ask questions,” Helga explained in an interview ⁸⁵. “I wanted to warn, in my books, how the best of feelings can be altered by a bad ideology.” ⁸⁵ This credo, born from her unique experience as the child of a perpetrator, permeates her writing. Indeed, her literature often gives voice not only to her personal anguish but also to the **suffering of others who were caught on the “wrong side” of history** – whether that be German children indoctrinated in the Hitler Youth, women complicit in crimes, or ordinary Germans who lived in fear and silence while a “collective madness” overtook their nation ⁸⁶.

Stage and Film Adaptations

Helga Schneider’s compelling life story and the themes of her work have also been adapted for the stage and screen, bringing her narrative to an even wider audience. In 2004, *Lasciami andare, madre* was transformed into a theatrical production in Italy ⁸⁷. Famed Italian filmmaker and director **Lina Wertmüller** directed the stage adaptation, which premiered at the Nuovo Teatro Eliseo. The play starred notable actors Roberto Herlitzka and Milena Vukotic, with Vukotic (a veteran actress) portraying the mother figure on stage ⁸⁷ ⁸⁸. This **stage play** distilled the intense mother-daughter confrontation of Schneider’s memoir into a live performance, enabling audiences to witness, in real time, the emotional clash between a daughter demanding answers and a mother clinging to a heinous past. The fact that Wertmüller – herself known for exploring historical and political themes – chose to adapt Helga’s story is a testament to the material’s dramatic power. The production was well-received, riding on the wave of interest that the memoir had generated in Italy and prompting further discussion about memory and forgiveness.

Over a decade later, Schneider’s story found a new medium. In 2017, a British film titled **Let Me Go** premiered, inspired by Helga Schneider’s memoir and life ⁸⁹. Directed by **Polly Steele**, the film is explicitly “based on the true-life story of Helga Schneider” ⁹⁰. Actress Juliet Stevenson starred as Helga (the character is named Helga in the film), with Karin Bertling as the aged mother (renamed Traudi) and Jodhi May and Lucy Boynton portraying the younger generations. *Let Me Go* is set in the year 2000 and expands the scope beyond Helga’s own encounter to include the impact on her fictional daughter and granddaughter, thus spanning four generations of women ⁹¹. By doing so, the film emphasized a core message: the long shadow of the Holocaust and Nazi crimes falls not only on direct victims but also on the descendants of perpetrators, creating what one review called “ghosts of the past and the impact they leave on the present.” ⁹² The plot sees the character Helga, long settled in England, receiving news that her mother (in Vienna) is dying, and traveling with her granddaughter to finally face the past. The film’s portrayal of the mother – still proud of her SS years – and the horrified, conflicted daughter closely mirrors Schneider’s memoir ⁹³. *Let Me Go* premiered at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2017 ⁸⁹ and was later screened at various Jewish film festivals, sparking conversations about intergenerational trauma. Through cinema, Schneider’s personal story reached new audiences in the UK, US, and beyond, many of whom may not have been familiar with her books. It brought to life the painful dialogues and haunting questions that her memoir had raised: How could a mother choose **Hitler over her own child**? Can a daughter ever truly be free from the sins of her parent? The film medium added visual and emotional layers – for example, flashbacks of 1940s events – underscoring the enduring nature of Helga’s scars. Polly Steele’s adaptation was described as difficult yet important, offering a “generational history” that compels viewers to consider how the atrocities of WWII continued to echo decades later ⁹⁴. Helga Schneider’s reaction to the film has not been widely recorded, but the mere fact of the adaptation indicates the universal resonance of her life narrative.

In addition to these adaptations, Helga Schneider’s experiences have been frequently featured in media coverage, especially around Holocaust Remembrance ceremonies in Italy. Her childhood meeting with Hitler, for instance, has been recounted in newspapers as a startling anecdote that brings history to life – the image of a little girl in Hitler’s bunker offers a unique lens on the war. In a 2025 interview timed for **Giorno della Memoria** (Holocaust Memorial Day), Helga – now in her late 80s – reflected again on that

episode under the bombs in 1944, describing Hitler as “*un vecchio... ricurvo*” (a bent, old man) and emphasizing how writing about these memories has been her salvation: “*È la scrittura che mi ha salvata*” (“Writing is what saved me”) ¹⁴. This underscores how thoroughly her life and art are interwoven. Schneider has effectively become a **witness** on multiple platforms: through her books, through theater and film, and through her personal appearances and interviews, all of which collectively ensure that the history she lived is not forgotten.

Legacy and International Reception

Helga Schneider’s journey from abandoned child to lauded author and witness of history is as remarkable as the stories she tells in her books. Today she is frequently cited as a courageous voice confronting the Holocaust’s legacy from an uncommon angle. Schneider is often described as a **transnational writer** – ethnically German and a victim of Nazi upheaval, yet writing in Italian and deeply embedded in Italian cultural life ⁹⁵. This unique position has given her work an added richness. She brings a German historical memory into Italian literature, thereby also bridging audiences. In fact, her works have been translated into over a dozen languages, allowing her personal story to reverberate across the world ⁶⁹. Readers from Europe to the Americas have identified with Schneider’s search for truth and grappled with the difficult questions she raises. Her memoir *Lasciami andare, madre* in particular became a focal point for discussion in book clubs, classrooms, and newspapers internationally. It challenged readers to imagine what they might do in her place – **Would you meet a parent who had done monstrous things?** – and to consider the weight of forgiveness. “*Helga Schneider’s Let Me Go reveals the ethical burden that an author invariably feels in retelling private events,*” wrote scholar Stefania Lucamante, noting the delicate balance Schneider had to strike between personal narrative and historical responsibility ⁵⁷. The memoir has been used in curricula about the Holocaust; educators see it as a springboard for debating morality, guilt by association, and the possibility (or impossibility) of reconciliation after heinous crimes ⁹⁶. By publishing her story, Schneider also inadvertently placed herself in the public eye in a way she hadn’t been before. As a result, she has had to answer not just literary critics but also journalists and readers who sometimes asked very frank questions – for instance, whether she **hated** her mother or whether one can still love a parent who chose genocide. Schneider’s consistent answer has been nuanced: “*No, I don’t hate her. It’s just that I don’t love her,*” she concludes in *Lasciami andare, madre*, after recounting all the horror ⁹⁷. Such candor is jarring yet insightful, and it encapsulates the emotional numbness that can be the final outcome of an unresolved parent-child relationship.

In her adopted homeland Italy, Schneider has long been recognized as an important literary figure. She received the Rapallo Prize in 1996 and the Chianti Prize in 2000 for her early works ⁶¹, and her books have been published by major houses like Adelphi, Rizzoli, Salani, and Einaudi. Italian readers admire her clear, unadorned writing style and her willingness to confront painful memories head-on. A reviewer for *La Repubblica* in 2004 called Helga “*la straniera dal Führer alla Montagnola*”, meaning “the foreign woman from the Führer’s bunker to Bologna’s Montagnola” (a park in Bologna) ⁹⁸ – underlining how she carries the weight of history from Germany to her life in Italy. Many Italians, whose own country has had to reckon with Fascist history, find parallels and lessons in Schneider’s works. Schneider has often engaged with the public directly, especially younger generations: over the last twenty years, she has dedicated herself to what she calls a “grande lavoro di testimonianza” – a great work of testimony – speaking in schools, libraries, and conferences about life under Nazism and the importance of remembrance ². Students who hear her speak are struck by the fact that they are listening to someone who actually met Hitler as a child and whose mother was part of the Nazi machinery. In these talks, Schneider does not sugarcoat the truth; she describes how ordinary people can be seduced by ideology and stresses the need for vigilance against intolerance. “*We need a culture of respecting the Other,*” she urges, warning that societal prejudices can creep back if we aren’t careful ⁸² ⁸³. This aspect of her legacy – as an educator and moral witness – is highly regarded. Italian media often

interview her around January 27 (Holocaust Memorial Day), and her insights are quoted in articles with headlines like *"I racconti di Helga, bambina nel bunker di Hitler"* – "Helga's memories, the little girl in Hitler's bunker" ¹⁴ . Such coverage highlights how Schneider's personal narrative has become part of the larger fabric of Holocaust memory in Italy.

Internationally, Schneider's reception has been similarly respectful, though not without debate. In the English-speaking world, *Let Me Go* garnered positive reviews in outlets like *Publishers Weekly*, the *Washington Post*, and *The Women's Review of Books*, which notably ran a piece titled "The Unmothering" ⁹⁹ . These reviews underscored how unusual and valuable her perspective is – a mirror image to the more common survivor memoirs, shining light on the psyche of a perpetrator (through the mother) and the collateral damage on family. Some commentators drew comparisons to other memoirs of children of Nazis (such as Traudl Junge's or Melissa Müller's works), but Schneider's raw, literary approach set it apart. In Germany and Austria, her books stirred perhaps the most uneasy discussions. There, Schneider was seen as both an insider and outsider – a German-born woman holding a mirror up to German society's darkest past. Coverage in German newspapers like *Neues Deutschland* and on ZDF (a major TV network) discussed *Laß mich gehen* and raised critical questions about how Schneider portrayed the Holocaust ⁷⁴ ⁷⁵ . Yet, many readers in Germany, especially post-war generations, appreciated her work for contributing to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (the process of coming to terms with the past). Schneider's books in German translation found a significant readership; for example, her childhood memoir was published as *Der Scheiterhaufen von Berlin* in 1997 (later reissued as *Kein Himmel über Berlin* – "No Sky Above Berlin") ¹⁰⁰ . The very title "No Sky Above Berlin" conveys the doom of her wartime childhood and became an evocative phrase in reviews.

It is worth noting that Schneider's writing also provides representation to those Germans who were *themselves* victims in a certain sense – such as children torn from parents, or ordinary civilians devastated by war. *"She also gives voice to a minority of the German population that suffered a lot under Hitler and during the war,"* El País wrote, referring to Germans who did not embrace Nazism yet paid the price for their leaders' crimes ⁸⁶ . Schneider's stance, however, is never to equate German suffering with that of the Nazis' victims, but rather to illuminate how an entire society was broken – some by being dragged into complicity, others by being crushed if they didn't conform. In her interviews, she has often acknowledged that while she personally endured a *"childhood in rubble"* and the loss of her mother to fanaticism, the central tragedy remains the Holocaust and millions of lives exterminated ⁸⁶ . She sees her role as *witness* and *warner*. By asking questions and writing about these topics, Schneider hopes to prevent history from repeating. *"Quando ero piccola mi dicevano di non pensare, solo sapere... Dopo la guerra si disse basta, non parliamone più. Ma io sì ho voluto domandare,"* she says – "When I was little they told me not to think, only to obey... After the war people said 'enough, let's not talk about it anymore.' But I wanted to ask questions." ⁸⁵ Her books are, ultimately, those urgent questions in print form – *Could this happen again? How can love and innocence be perverted by ideology?* – and they double as her answers, warning the world of how easily humanity's "best sentiments" can be twisted by propaganda ⁸⁵ .

In summary, Helga Schneider's life story and literary corpus form a comprehensive testimony of the lasting impact of Nazi atrocities on families and individuals who were not in the camps but were nonetheless ensnared by that evil. She has given us the indelible image of a little girl watching her mother walk away into the darkness of Nazi crime – an image that is as haunting as any in Holocaust literature. Through courage and candor, Schneider transformed her private nightmare into narratives that others could learn from. As one British reviewer aptly observed, her book is about *"Mommie Dearest, Nazi Style"* ¹⁰¹ – but unlike the famous Hollywood memoir of an abusive mother, Helga's story extends beyond personal catharsis; it forces us to confront the unsettling truth that some of those who perpetuated the 20th century's greatest crimes were also mothers, fathers, spouses – ordinary people led astray by an inhuman ideology. Helga Schneider's legacy is that she looked this truth in the eye and

did not flinch from writing it down. In doing so, she has helped ensure that the world “**does not forget**,” honoring the plea implicit in every story from the Shoah. Her work stands as a bridge between the past and present, a deeply personal chronicle that has achieved universal relevance by teaching us about the cost of fanaticism, the complexity of forgiveness, and the enduring power of memory ⁸⁵ ⁷² .

Sources: Helga Schneider’s biographical details and quotes are drawn from her own memoirs and interviews ⁴ ²³ ²⁴ ¹⁰² , as well as profiles in *The Independent* ²³ ²⁴ , *El País* ⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ , and Italian media including *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica* ⁴⁹ ¹⁴ . Critical commentary and reception are documented in academic analyses ⁵⁷ and reviews cited via Encyclopedia.com ⁷⁰ and the German press ⁷⁴ ⁷⁵ . These sources collectively attest to the breadth of discussion surrounding Schneider’s life and work, across multiple languages and countries.

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